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SUBJECT: A RETURN TO YEI, ONE YEAR LATER

REF: KHARTOUM 709

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief E. Whitaker, Reason: Section 1.5 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: CG Juba traveled to Yei on April 1 for a brief visit, almost exactly one year after his three-day visit to Yei as part of a Joint Assessment Mission team. The report from the prior trip described in detail the dilapidated condition of the town, located just north of the Ugandan border in Western Equatoria. The intervening year has delivered a palpable peace dividend to the residents of Yei, with improved roads, a school, and sanitation. The security climate has worsened, however, and SPLA raids against the local population have brought tensions to the boiling points. End Summary

The Peace Dividend

¶2. (U) CG,s visit from Khartoum in April 2005 featured a series of meetings in which SPLM/SRRC authorities, who complained loudly about being assessed to death, but assisted very little. A low altitude helicopter flight above the road from Yei to Juba on this trip revealed that some things have changed. The all weather dirt road was in remarkably good condition, and a number of the SAF checkpoints stretching southwest to the 35-mile marker had disappeared. The airport outside of Yei offered another pleasant surprise. What had been a narrow strip of red gravel in the middle of the bush was now under extension, and two new fieldstone and brick buildings sat at one end on the strip. A 20-seat aircraft that flies regularly scheduled flights from Kampala was off-loading passengers and freight.

¶3. (U) In 2005, the trip into town was a jolting 45-minute drive through ruts and mud wallows. A smooth gravel road has now reduced the ordeal to twenty minutes; at one point, the vehicle attained 50 mph. The town itself was undergoing transformation. Two huge water bladders supplied filtered and treated water, a response to the cholera outbreak that gripped Yei two months ago. The dirt roads in town were much improved. There was a bustle of commerce along the roads, and the customs lot was filled with large trucks from Uganda. A USAID funded school under construction in 2005 had opened: the pupils no longer sat on rocks under the shade of a mango tree. The landmine removal operation funded by USAID had also completed work on the far edge of town, and the once crumbling warehouse that UNHCR had leased was at the center of a smart new compound. Government buildings sported fresh coats of paint; screens and windows were in place. New zinc sheeting had replaced the rusting, bullet-stitched roof of the governor,s office.

¶4. (U) Yei,s new look provided a pleasant contrast to the decaying, war-ravaged town from a year ago. The population had clearly increased, and there was new construction visible everywhere. It was clear that the peace dividend that SPLM

authorities had clamored for in the months after the signature of the CPA was gradually being realized.

The Security Underbelly

15. (C) UNMIS South Sudan Head of Office James Ellery and CG met with the nine UN military observers resident in Yei and the commander of the Bangladeshi protection force. Their comments revealed a darker side of life in Yei, where an estimated 10,000 SPLA soldiers have redeployed from areas to the north into barracks⁸ that are actually huge clusters of abysmal grass shelters strung along the road to the airport. The UN military observer commander, a Russian naval officer, and the CIVPOL leader, a Swede, described the growing indiscipline of the SPLA troops.

16. (C) All SPLA troops had received a salary advance, initially a sore point in the ranks, but if anything, this had aggravated an already unhappy situation. Public drunkenness was rife, and quarrels between intoxicated soldiers had led to gunplay, including a recent firefight next to the CIVPOL sleeping quarters. The Russian complained that every night SPLA soldiers were shooting at the moon.⁸

This detail particularly peeved Ellery, who had learned that SPLA troops protecting U.N. Mine Action teams had only three or four rounds per man, and that the SPLA had retired from a firefight between UNMIS protection forces and the LRA in Yambio because of insufficient ammunition. The UN military observers continued that SPLA troops had thrown stones at SPLA officers, had closed the road north in protest, and had begun charging tolls at makeshift road blocks before permitting vehicles to pass. The trip between

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Yei and Juba can cost as much as USD 50 in tolls.

17. (C) The UNMOs described nightly attacks on private residences by armed intruders intent upon robbery. SPLA military police had arrested a handful of soldiers, but the attacks continued. A Filipino CIVPOL officer who had helped investigate the fatal attack on the UNHCR compound (reftel) provided additional details on that incident. He said that four armed SPLA soldiers and four unarmed guards were present, and it was likely that the bandits had help from someone on the inside. The attacker killed by the SPLA had been shot through the shoulder, then killed by another round fired through the neck at very close range in what looked to be an execution. SPLA Military Intelligence claimed that before his death the man had spoken with a Ugandan accent, but they refused the UNMIS request to photograph the man's face and post it in markets aroundtown to help fix his identity. There had been no follow up on two other suspects detained briefly by the SPLA, and then released.

18. (C) An Australian major described several recent incidents he had witnessed. A group of SPLA soldiers had gone into a store and taken merchandise, then refused to pay, stating that they had spent years in the bush fighting for the people, and expected to be compensated now. This spoils of peace⁸ mentality extended beyond commercial goods. At a DDR meeting organized by the American Refugee Committee in which UNMIS participated, representatives of the local population detailed abuses from their supposed protectors. Both officers and enlisted men had seized land from its rightful owners and built houses and stores. SPLA troops frequently confiscated livestock. Several women angrily complained about shotgun weddings in reverse, whereby an armed soldier arrived and informed a father that the soldier was taking the man's daughter to marry.⁸ The Australian concluded that the population is thus far too frightened to strike back, and that tensions are nearing the boiling point.

No LRA Near Yei

¶10. (C) The UNMO officers said that they believed there were no LRA forces near Yei, although the local population was convinced of the opposite. Although SPLA officers adamantly insisted that SAF continues to resupply the LRA, the UNMOs were skeptical. If the SAF assisted with resupply, they noted, the SAF was doing a very poor job, since LRA raids into Sudan targeted basic foodstuffs and communications gear.

On departure from Yei, Ellery and CG approached UPDF officers from the company stationed next to the airstrip. They confirmed that there had been no LRA activity nearby for the past five months and that the UPDF would shortly deploy south to the Congo border near Yambio to begin joint operations with the SPLA against any LRA forces that moved north into Sudan out of Garamba National Park. The Ugandan officers estimated there were 200 LRA fighters still in northern Ugandan, less than 200 in Garamba, 150 outside of Lafon east of the Nile, and other bands west of the Nile near Maridi.

Comment

¶11. (C) There have been additional reports of SPLA indiscipline in Torit and Maridi, and the security climate is preoccupying the SPLM/GOSS leadership. Legal Affairs Minister Makwei canceled a meeting with CG and USAID staff last week to attend a high-level meeting on security and raised this as the top issue in meeting with USG officials rescheduled the next day. Eight SPLM and USAP MPs from the Southern Legislative Assembly who attended a dinner with CG on May 1 described increasing problems with the SPLA in Juba. They universally concurred that the security had become the most immediate concern.

¶12. (C) SPLA misbehavior is expending SPLM capital with the population of Yei, and offsetting any gains from the peace dividend. No effective DDR is under way. Until the GoSS/SPLM opens suitable SPLA bases, restructures its forces, pays the troops, and improves discipline, more negative incidents seem inevitable.
STEINFELD